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ABSTRACT

Most definitions and training of assertive behavior fail to consider cultural diversity in social skills. Verbal, nonverbal and cognitive components of assertive behavior were investigated to determine cultural variations in assertiveness. Black (N=30) and white (N=30) male and female college students enacted 16 role-play scenes with 4 role players, and completed 2 paper and pencil measures in addition to a demographic data sheet. Results from the behavioral measures indicated that whites exhibited more praise than blacks. On the self-report inventories, blacks had less knowledge of appropriate assertion and tended to show lower assertive levels than whites. Blacks also requested assertive training more frequently than whites and represented a lower socioeconomic class. One significant sex difference was found: females viewed themselves as less assertive than males. Results suggest that blacks, and possibly females, may have more of a cognitive rather than a behavioral deficit in assertive skills. (Author/NRB)

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Components of Assertive Behavior: Are There Black-White Differences?

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Running Head: Black-White Differences

Components of Assertive Behavior: Are There Black-White Differences?

Definitions and training of assertive behavior frequently employ the term "appropriate expression" without regard to one's culture, social class, or ethnicity. Wolpe (1969) referred to assertive trainig as a technique for the deconditioning of maladaptive anxiety that inhibits appropriate social interactions or for the control of fears, anxieties, and inhibitions which prevent people from expressing real feelings. Lazarus (1971) pointed out that training in "emotional freedom" implies the recognition and appropriate expression of each affective state. Lange and Jakubowski (1976) defined assertion as standing up for personal rights, expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways without violating the rights of another person. Cheek (1976) criticized these definitions of assertion because they gave no recognition to the possibility that appropriate expression may be directly related to one's culture.

Cheek (1976) stated that the theoretical and practical modes of assertion have ignored the interracial implications of assertiveness, have failed to account for cultural history which may affect what a person considers appropriate, have a social class bias in that the examples used in assertive training are very middle class, and have not been clear about intent or the race of the asserter or assertee. Along these same lines, Cheek (1976) pointed out that faulty learning histories, reinforcement histories, and the legal and social separation of blacks and whites in this society all may have contributed to

different modes of assertive behavior in blacks. For purposes of survival, blacks at one time (prior to the sixties) learned not to be assertive, not to exercise their own rights, or not to stand up for themselves for fear of negative consequences. Blacks appeared to have developed passive verbal and nonverbal behavior patterns. However in the sixties, with the rise of black consciousness, blacks appeared to have become more aggressive (Hazzard, Note 2).

In an effort to evaluate the influence of this social change on blacks' behavior, Hazzard (Note 2) compared the written assertive responses of black and white college students. Results of this study indicated the following: (1) blacks had a higher level of assertion than whites; (2) whites exhibited more positive assertion towards blacks than blacks did toward whites; (3) whites compiled more in interracial situations than blacks; (4) blacks tended to modify their assertive responses more frequently in interracial situations; and (5) whites made more requests in both intra- and interracial situations than did blacks. These results clearly support cultural variations in the expression of assertive social skills, but may be criticized for the use of self-report inventories only.

The present study compared the assertive responses of blacks and whites in behavioral role-play assertive situations. Both black and white, male and females role players were employed in these scenes. Additionally, two self-report inventories were used to assess subjects' level and knowledge of assertion. Specific hypotheses included the following: (1) blacks would have higher levels of assertion than whites; (2) there would be cultural variations in nonverbal expressions of assertion, with blacks appearing to be more aggressive than whites;

(3) whites would appear to be more "appropriately" assertive on verbal and nonverbal measures; and (4) females' assertive levels would be lower (more passive) than males.

METHOD

Subjects. Sixty undergraduate students at Kent State University participated in the study. There were 15 male and 15 female black subjects, and 15 male and 15 female white subjects. Each received class points for their participation.

Questionnaires and Role-play Tasks. All subjects completed, in the following order, a background information sheet, the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) (Rathus, 1973), and the Paper-Pencil Test on Assertiveness (Caldwell, Note 1). The RAS was designed to provide a global measure of assertiveness, while the Paper-Pencil Test on Assertiveness was devised to assess knowledge of appropriate assertive responses.

In addition to the paper and pencil inventories, subjects also participated in the Behavioral Role-play Assertiveness Test (BRPT)[1], which consisted of 16 actual interpersonal situations that required assertive responses. Role players prompted the subjects' responses to these scenes by providing a prompt line after the scene was described. The following is an example of a scene used in this study: Narrator: You bring your car into a local service station for a grease job and oil change. You tell the attendant you can only leave the car for an hour, as you have another appointment. He tells you to come back in 45 minutes and the car will be ready. When you return in an hour, you see that the car hasn't been touched. The attendant says:

Role player: I just haven't had the chance to get to it.

Finally, subjects completed the background information sheet which provided demographic data such as age, sex, marital status, and parents' socioeconomic status.

Role Players. Four undergraduate psychology majors (two males and two females; two blacks and two whites) served as role players. Role players were unaware of the hypotheses of the experiment.

Raters. Two raters (psychology graduate students; one black and one white) were employed to assess and rate the verbal and nonverbal measures from the BRPT. One rater scored all the verbal and nonverbal responses and a second rater scored 50% of the responses selected at random. Prior to the study, raters were simultaneously trained by the experimenters on the different measures employed to assess subjects' responses and to enable utilization of scoring sheets. Raters were naive to the purpose of the experiment.

Procedure

Upon arrival subjects were informed that they were to be in a study on social interactional behavior and were given a verbal description of the procedures. Subjects were then asked to sign an informed consent form. Subjects then completed a background information sheet and the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule. To insure confidentiality , code numbers were used on questionnaires and Role-play tasks. After completion of the first two inventories, subjects enacted the 16 scenes from the BRPT with 4 role players. Role-play scenes were randomized across role players and scenes were described via an audiotape prior to the role players' deliverance of the prompt

line. The role-play scenes were videotaped and later rated by two independent raters. Upon completion of the role-play tasks, subjects were asked to complete the Paper Pencil Test on Assertiveness. Subjects were then debriefed.

Dependent Variables

A set of 16 scenes was presented to each subject. Each scene or situation required an assertive response which varied but included "positive" responses such as praise and appreciation, and "negative" responses such as anger, displeasure, or disappointment. Verbal and nonverbal responses were rated on the following variables:

Content. This was a measure of the subject's particular response to the scene. The following classifications were used:

1. Negative content:
   (a) compliance: compliance was rated on a dichotomous occurrence or nonoccurrence basis. Compliance was scored if the subject did not resist the other person's position.
   (b) request for new behavior: responses scored in this category required more than mere noncompliance; subjects had to show evidence of wanting the role player to change his/her behavior. Requests were scored on an occurrence or nonoccurrence basis.
2. Positive content:
   (a) praise: this content indicated the subject expressed approval, admiration, or was complimentary toward the person's behavior. Praise was scored on an occurrence or nonoccurrence basis.

Overall assertiveness. This was a global measure of the subject's overall responses on the Behavioral Role-play Assertiveness Tasks.

Nonverbal responses. These were measures of the subject's behavioral responses on each of the sixteen role-play scenes. The following measures were used:

1. latency of response - length of time from the end of the prompt to the subject's first word.
2. duration of response - length of time from subject's first word to the end of the response.
3. eye contact - proportion of time subject looked at the role player during the response to response duration.
4. voice intonation - loudness of speech; rated on a three-point scale from low to loud.

Other dependent measures included level of assertion (from the RAS) and knowledge of appropriate assertion (from the Paper-Pencil Test). Four demographic variables (socioeconomic status, size of hometown, birth order, and family size) also served as dependent measures.

RESULTS

The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to assess interrater reliability on the verbal and nonverbal measures from the Behavioral Role-play Assertiveness Tasks. Correlation coefficients for the verbal measures were .70, .62, .80, and .68 for praise, appreciation, compliance, and request for new behavior, respectively. For the nonverbal measures, correlation coefficients were .81, .93, 1.00, and .75 for latency, duration, eye contact, and tone of voice, respectively.

Multiple 2 (black and white) x 2 (male and female) multivariate and univariate analyses of variance were employed to analyze the verbal and nonverbal measures from the BRPT, assertive measures from the paper-pencil inventories, and the demographic variable. A percentage measure was calculated for individuals requesting assertive training during debriefing.

Verbal Measures. The univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for praise yielded a significant main effect for race, (F (1, 56) = 6.83, $p < .01$. Examination of mean scores showed that whites ($\bar{x}$ = 2.80) exhibited more praise than blacks ($\bar{x}$ = 2.20). The remaining verbal measures (appreciation, compliance and request for new behavior) did not yield significance.

Nonverbal Measures. No significance was obtained on the multivariate or univariate analyses for the nonverbal measures of latency, duration, eye contact, and tone of voice.

Paper and Pencil Measures. A significant race effect was obtained on the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for the paper-pencil measures, F (2, 55) = 3.22, $p < .05$. These data were further analyzed for each measure by ANOVAs. The univariate ANOVA for knowledge of assertion (scores from the Paper-Pencil Test on Assertiveness) yielded a significant main effect for race, F (1, 56) = 4.75, $p < .05$. Whites had more knowledge of appropriate assertion than did blacks. The means were 18.2 and 16.8, respectively.

The level of assertion ANOVA approached a significant race effect, F (1, 56) = 3.04, $p < .08$, with whites indicating higher levels of assertion than blacks (scores obtained from the RAS). Mean scores were 15.5 for whites and 6.60 for blacks.

A significant sex effect was also obtained on the MANOVA for the paper-pencil inventories, F (2, 55) = 3.83, $p < .05$. The level of assertion ANOVA yielded a significant main effect for sex, F (1, 56) = 3.87, $p < .05$. Males ($\bar{x}$ = 16.03) reported higher assertive levels on the Rathus than did females ($\bar{x}$ = 5.80).

Demographic Variables. There was a significant race effect obtained on the MANOVA for demographic measures, F (4, 53) = 2.42, $p < .05$. The univariate analysis for socioeconomic status yielded a main effect for race, F (1, 56) = 6.72, $p < .01$. Whites had a higher socioeconomic status than blacks, which could possibly influence assertive levels. Means were 2.00 and 2.46, respectively. No significance was obtained for the others demographic measures of size of hometown, birth order and family size.

Request for Assertion Training. A percentage measure was calculated for the number of subjects who requested assertion training during debriefing. Results indicated over 90% of the black subjects wanted assertive training, whereas only one white male felt such treatment was necessary.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study support some cultural variations in the expression of assertive social skills. In contrast to the Hazzard (Note 2) study, blacks in the present study tended to view themselves as less assertive than whites. The black subjects also had less knowledge of "appropriate" assertion and exhibited less positive assertion on the praise measure than their white counterparts. The differences in this study and the Hazzard study may possibly be

attributed to regional differences; the Hazzard study was conducted in the South, whereas the present study was conducted in the Midwest.

Cheek (1976) stated that blacks may have developed passive verbal and nonverbal communication patterns based on learning and reinforcement histories. This contention is not supported for the nonverbal measures, but is supported for one verbal measure and the paper-pencil inventories. The self-report measures approached and yielded significant differences with blacks tending to view themselves as less assertive and showing less knowledge of appropriate assertion than white subjects. It appears, at least for this study, that behaviorally, blacks and whites differ only slightly in assertiveness, but greater differences occur in cognitive components. This finding of cognitive differences may be equivalent to an "attitudinal lag" in which rapid behavioral indices do not coincide with self-report measures; or the behavior changes prior to the cognitions (Hersen, Eisler, & Miller, 1973). This is also supported by blacks' request for assertion training.

The use of a college population may also account for no racial differences in behavioral indices of assertion. Through modeling and continued exposure to whites, the black subjects may have learned to display "appropriate" behavioral responses.

The sex difference found in this study is consistent with previous literature (e.g., Wolfe & Fodor, 1975) that found females to be less assertive than males. This finding may possibly be due to socialization patterns.

Socioeconomic status, as would be expected, yielded a signifi-

cant race effect with whites having a higher socioeconomic level than blacks. Thus class differences may also account for some of the findings in this study. Socioeconomic status alone may influence assertive reactions and the relationship of assertiveness and social class should be investigated in future studies.

The implications of the present study suggest there are cultural variations in assertive social skills. Though generalizations are limited, it appears that blacks have less knowledge of appropriate assertion or define appropriate assertion in a different manner than whites. Blacks also tended to view themselves as less assertive or more passive than whites. Further investigations are needed to define blacks' perceptions of appropriate assertion so that assertive training programs may be developed to concentrate on the unique needs of this particular population.

Reference Notes

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2. Hazzard, M. An assessment of assertive behavior: A black-white comparison. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1979.

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Footnotes

[1]Copies of this test are available from the first author.